

# Reading 101—Reading for Non-readers

## Time to Get Serious

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**T**he problem with articles like this is the people who need to read them usually don't. That is particularly true of this article, since the topic is the importance of reading and how to encourage it in the workplace. If you are reading this, you probably don't need to be convinced that reading is an important part of your professional development. It's the people who are not reading who need to hear the message. That's the problem.

Another problem, of course, is that even if we read, we are often hesitant or unable to translate what we've learned into action—but that is a topic for another day.

### Reading and Program Management

What does this have to do with Defense Acquisition Management? I'm glad you asked. The body of available material related to our discipline is significant, and much of it can be found at the DAU press Web site. (The sidebar on p. 48 provides links to a few Web sites with reading lists, reviews, and—in most cases, free—access to the complete texts.) Government personnel can obtain free printed copies of many DAU publications, and almost everything is available online.

These reports and publications provide a tremendous opportunity to discover lessons learned by others, to explore new ideas, and to further our own professional development. Of particular interest are the Military Research Fellows Reports, which cover topics from

Transatlantic Armaments Cooperation to Simulation-Based Acquisition to an analysis of how cost-based strategies are undermining the DoD. Did I mention they are free?

### Why, What?

This article will focus on two questions:

- Why do some people not read?
- What can be done about it?

An admittedly unscientific inquiry into the “why” question identified three main reasons people give for not reading:

### **I DON'T HAVE ENOUGH TIME**

This is the most puzzling reason of the three. While Einstein did in fact prove that time is relative, everyone actually has the same number of hours in a day as long as our velocity does not get too close to the speed of light. How we choose to fill those hours varies significantly from person to person, but the amount of time in a day is essentially constant.

Therefore, the first explanation should probably be rephrased as follows: “I don't choose to spend time on reading, even though I have the same amount of time each day as everyone else.” While that doesn't really answer the question, it might shed some light on the situation. A lack of time is not the problem—the issue is a lack of will. Blaming inadequate hours in the day ignores the dimension of personal responsibility.

Everyone who makes decisions about how to spend time can decide to do a little reading once in a while. Even the president of the United

States (whose workdays are long, with a schedule largely dictated by others), manages to read books.

### **I DON'T KNOW WHERE TO START**

We can't complain about a shortage of reading material in the world today, so

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this second reason is probably rooted in a sense of being overwhelmed. So much is available that *could* be read, that deciding which selections *should* be read is no simple task. The solution is to stop trying to find the perfect starting point. Starting *somewhere* is better than not starting at all. The Harry Potter books teach more about courage, teamwork, and leadership than many management textbooks. All you

Of course the other solution is to ask for suggestions. Family, friends, and co-workers might be able to point you in the direction of an interesting book or magazine. Or check out *Books That Shaped Successful People*, edited by Kevin Kelly, to see what books various entertainers, professional athletes, politicians, and historical figures recommend.

### **I DON'T THINK READING MAKES A DIFFERENCE**

The cynical opinion that time spent reading is wasted cannot easily be defended, except perhaps in the case of people who only read material that is

Bennis would not object if we expand his advice to include human beings in general and not just executives. If enlightenment and wisdom are instrumental elements of success, then surely reading makes a difference.

Perhaps the hesitation is grounded in a fear that we can't remember much of what we read. Fortunately, the 19<sup>th</sup> Century English essayist Sydney Smith addressed this point when he wrote:

"It is no more necessary that a man should remember the different dinners and suppers which have made him healthy, than the different books which

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good food in a strong  
body, and the results of  
great reading in a full  
and powerful mind."**

**—19th Century English Essayist  
Sydney Smith**



really need to do is find a topic that interests you, find a book on that topic (your local librarian, bookstore clerk, or Internet search engine can help), and read it. It actually is that simple.

not worth reading. In their case, the suggestions in the previous paragraph and the sidebar apply.

Reading matters a great deal. Don't take my word for it—ask professor Warren Bennis who wrote, "How can executives become more enlightened? I would suggest that executives read more." I'm sure

have made him wise. Let us see the results of good food in a strong body, and the results of great reading in a full and powerful mind."

Certainly a number of other reasons explain why some people do not read. Time and space limitations preclude evaluating and dismantling the arguments of those non-readers within the confines of this article. Rather than con-

## WEB SITES PROVIDING FREE READING MATERIAL

Defense Acquisition University  
Press Site

[www.dau.mil/pubs/pubs-main.asp](http://www.dau.mil/pubs/pubs-main.asp)

Military Reading List Web site

[www.militaryreadinglist.com](http://www.militaryreadinglist.com)

Great Books & Classics Online

[www.grtbooks.com](http://www.grtbooks.com)

Project Gutenberg—free e-books

<http://promo.net/pg/>

Tom Peter's Reading List

[www.tompeters.com/toms\\_world/  
read.asp](http://www.tompeters.com/toms_world/read.asp)

The Atlantic Monthly's  
Best Books of 2001

[www.theatlantic.com/issues/2001/  
12/schwarz.htm](http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2001/12/schwarz.htm)

Chief of Staff of the Air Force's  
Reading List—2003

[http://www.af.mil/lib/sight/  
readinglist.pdf](http://www.af.mil/lib/sight/readinglist.pdf)

tinue the previous trajectory, let's turn to our second question. What can be done about it? How can readers help non-readers discover the personal and professional benefits of reading?

**Encourage Reading on the Job**  
Wouldn't it be nice if it was a matter of policy that every person in the organization should spend 30 minutes of work time each week reading something? Thirty minutes is a mere 1.25 percent of a 40-hour workweek, and most of us probably spend more time than that walking to and from our vehicles. Thirty minutes is probably too little time, but it's a start, particularly for those who think they get less time each day than the rest of us.

Few of us have the authority to set that kind of policy, of course. However, you don't have to be the boss to make this work: you can suggest it to the boss and let him or her turn it into a policy. But unless there is a policy *against* reading,

most of us can carve out a few minutes each week to curl up with a good book.

### Create a Library

This doesn't have to be a massive undertaking—any collection of relevant, interesting books will do. Secure some shelf space for your favorites and spread the word that they are available for borrowing. (If you ever want to see them again, you'll probably want to have some kind of sign-out sheet, and even then

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Those of us who  
recognize its value  
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point our less  
literate brethren in  
the right direction,  
but ultimately the  
responsibility is  
theirs.**

you can count on losing a few, but this might be a small price to pay if it results in a more literate work environment.)

### Pass Along Useful Articles and Books

Just kidding. Giving reading material to someone who doesn't read will only result in someone who doesn't read having one more book or article stashed away somewhere—unread. To manipulate a familiar adage, "You can lead a horse to water, but if he doesn't drink, that'll be one thirsty horse later."

A better approach might be to pass along recommendations and reviews and leave it to the individuals to decide what they want to read. Of course, if you know someone is already a reader, then passing along relevant material is a fine and noble act. But if we're trying to encourage reading among non-readers, this approach is equivalent to teaching a pig to whistle.

### Write Stuff That is Worth Reading

Previous assertions about the vast quantity of reading material aside, there exists an unfortunate percentage of literature that is *not* worthwhile. It can be painfully dull, entirely irrelevant, dangerously incorrect, or it may have any number of other deadly flaws. So if you want to encourage the people around you to become better readers, you might have to take matters into your own hands and write something lively, interesting, accurate, and relevant yourself. Everyone has a story to tell—perhaps a lesson learned the hard way, a successful approach to a difficult problem, or an analysis of a particular activity. If you can make it occasionally funny, so much the better. Non-readers are more likely to read an article if they know the author. And once they read one, they just might read another.

### Reading—An Investment in Yourself

Reading is a vital component of personal and professional growth. Those of us who recognize its value can and should help point our less literate brethren in the right direction, but ultimately the responsibility is theirs. In our busy lives, it can be difficult to make the time to read, and in the Information Age it may seem a monumental task to sift through the masses of available reading material. Let there be no doubt that overcoming these difficulties is a worthwhile endeavor for every human being. Reading is indeed a lifelong investment in yourself.

**Editor's Note:** The author welcomes questions or comments on this article. Contact him at [WardD@nima.mil](mailto:WardD@nima.mil).